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The Reverend M. Archdeacon

from

The Author

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S E R M O N

PREACHED AT THE

PARISH CHURCH OF ST. PETER LE POOR,

IN THE

C I T Y O F L O N D O N,

ON SUNDAY, DEC. 9, 1792,

BY THE

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TO THE
PARISHIONERS OF ST. PETER LE POOR.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

SINCE a probationary Sermon is required from the respective Candidates for your Lectureship as a necessary Test of their Abilities; and since many Electors had it not in their Power to attend at the Delivery of this Discourse, it is humbly and respectfully submitted to their Perusal by

SPITAL-FIELDS,
DEC. 20, 1792.

THE AUTHOR.

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S E R M O N.

HEBREWS vi. 1, 2.

Leaving the Principles of the Doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto Perfection ; not laying again the Foundation of Repentance from dead Works, and of Faith towards God, of the Doctrine of Baptisms, and of laying on of Hands, and of Resurrection of the Dead, and of eternal Judgment.

PROFICIENCY in knowledge and practice is the desirable object of every liberal and virtuous mind. Excellence is not immediately attainable either in art or science, either in the works of nature or the operations of man. There is a gradual advancement from the elementary principles, on which all matter, beauty, and system depend, to that arrangement observable in the animal, vegetable, and mineral creation, in
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the elegant inventions of mankind, and the refined institutes of social life. The embryo assumes, in regular progression, a more distinct appearance, acquires additional powers by the circulation of its fluids, and emerges a perfectly formed creature. The seed bursts forth from its tegument, expands its juices, and regularly rises to maturity. A proper matrix prepares for the production of metals and minerals, and in that matrix they continually receive increase.

Many ages elapsed from the primeval creation of man, e'er the ore of the mine was refined and rendered malleable; e'er the low-built shed was transformed into a magnificent palace, and the rude plank converted to a stately vessel, borne by the winds and riding on the ocean. And, whoever presumes to deny the patriarchal establishment of society, (when the respect and deference paid to the common parent created a natural subordination and a natural arbitrator) may contemplate man in a savage state of ferocity, when the sight of a fellow-creature was the signal for slaughter, or for flight. But, as sin introduced confusion, and the inhabitants of the earth were dispersed, many centuries must have passed away, e'er mutual distrust was overcome, e'er a compact similar to that of * Abraham and Lot was agreed upon; and the experience of many

* Gen. xiii. 7.

generations

generations could alone have established the basis of that security, on which our life, our liberty, and property depend.

Analagous to this progress in nature, in arts, and civilization, the human mind advances in knowledge, should advance in goodness, and virtue is necessarily connected with knowledge in the mass of mankind. In addition to that information arising from our progression in life, we acquire the judgment of past ages, profit by their failings, improve by their successes, and should regularly proceed towards perfection.

Agreeable to these decrees of the Almighty, and in aid of that natural consciousness of a Supreme Being implanted in the mind itself, the Lord Jehovah has gradually unfolded his will, and revealed his statutes. From the command given to Noah, for the preservation of the human race, "*Who so sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed* *," the revelations of the Most High were successively manifested to Job, the Idumæan; Abraham, the Chaldean; and Jethro, the Midianite; till the sons of Israel were prepared for the law of Mount Sinai, the government of Moses, and the priesthood of Aaron.

David and the prophets, inspired by the prescience of him that inhabiteth eternity, foretold, that these threatening de-

* Gen. ix. 6.

nunciations of the law should be superseded by a mild and gentle dispensation, and raised the expectation of a general deliverer. But, before the manifestation of the Messiah, Elias, or John the Baptist, the representative of Elias, first appeared, preaching the doctrine of repentance, and crying “*in the wilderness, prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight* *.”

God, who at sundry times, and in divers manners, spake in time past unto the fathers by the Prophets, in the fulness of time spake unto them by his Son, whom he hath appointed Heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds †.” That glimmering of revelation which shone forth in idolatrous sacrifices, after Polytheism had invaded the nations, was gradually converted from the day-spring on high to the meridian splendour of the Sun of Righteousness. That imperfect system of religion, which the obstinacy and impenitence of the Jews had prevented the goodness of the Lord from completing at a more early period, (for God, in his mercy, refuses greater manifestation of himself to those nations who would resist greater evidence, and consequently render themselves more criminal) was then fulfilled.

The eternal Son of the eternal Father divested himself of principalities and powers, to assume the form of a creature; descended from thrones and dominions to the humble stable of

* Isaiah xl. 3. Matt. iii. 3.

† Hebr. i. 1, 2.

Bethlehem, to teach virtue and exhibit perfection, not only in precept, but by example; and to cancel the sins of a penitent world, by his all-sufficient sacrifice. To prosecute and accomplish these purposes of his advent, twelve illiterate Galilæans were selected the companions of his pilgrimage, the witnesses of his miracles, the spectators of his sufferings, and the recorders of his life and doctrines. To these future apostles he expounded the scriptures, interpreted the prophecies. These heard the voice proclaiming him the beloved Son of God; saw the lame walk, the deaf hear, the dumb speak, the lepers cleansed, and the dead raised to life. Yet, so powerfully does the attractive influence of terrestrial objects centre our affections on this globe, and bias our judgment, that, these *chosen* disciples, the constant attendants of his public ministry, could scarce be persuaded, that the Lord of Life should die for those by whom he died; should submit to the taunting insults of the Jews; and the agonies of a crucifixion; "*for they savoured not the things that be of God, but those that be of men* *."

But the resurrection of our Saviour cleared to them the mystery of godliness. The film that had obscured their sight was immediately removed, and transitory things, the pleasures and vanities of this world, ceased to have any value, when counterpoised against eternal glory. To these unlearned fishermen the scepticism,

* Matt. xvi. 23.

superstition, and bigotry of the philosophic Grecian, the haughty Roman, and self-sufficient Pharisee successively submitted. To promote sanctification, to meliorate the heart, while they enlightened the understanding, was the object of the evangelists; and this they laboured to effect, though persecution, imprisonment, and martyrdom were the certain consequence. Preaching repentance from dead works, as preparatory and necessary for the reception of divine truths; they admitted faithful converts into the society of Christians, “ *by baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost **.”

Faith in God necessarily implies a belief that he is, consequently, since righteousness is his law, that he is a rewarder of the righteous, and an avenger of the wicked. Faith in the resurrection of our Saviour, is an assured presumption of our own resurrection: hence the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment are primary articles of the Christian faith. On this basis Christianity is established, and these doctrines are indispensably necessary to salvation. But the disciple of Jesus rests not here. “ *Forgetting those things that are behind †,*” constantly improving those virtues and graces he has already attained, he goes on from “ *strength to strength*”, presses for the prize of the high calling of Jesus Christ, and aims at perfection.

* Matt. xxviii. 19.

† Philip. iii. 13.

Repentance is only introductory to christianity ; holiness and purity are required from its professors. But, if through the frailty of human nature, sins of ignorance or infirmity surprise the well-disposed christian, sincere penitence is always accepted through the mediation of our Saviour, and the offence cancelled by his universal atonement. The certainty of this merciful acceptance delivers mankind from those gloomy horrors and damnatory sentences, which deluded, or deluding enthusiasts press to the despair and distraction of weak and wavering minds ; and the consciousness of this doctrine is the strongest motive and encouragement to future obedience.

The christian's faith in God, is not an assent to the existence of a first cause with the deist, but an assured and hopeful belief in God the Father the Creator, God the Son the Redeemer, and God the Holy Ghost the Sanctifier. To investigate the union of this mysterious nature of the Godhead is neither necessary nor possible. Presumptuous men, proud of their reason, have attempted to measure infinity with a span, to ascertain Omniscience by human knowledge, and define Omnipotence by earthly powers. Be it our duty, convinced of the authenticity of the Scriptures, to adhere to the doctrines revealed by the Son of man, who came down from Heaven, and

would have taught us heavenly things, if equal to our comprehension, or requisite to our sanctification.

By baptism we are admitted into the Gospel covenant, by confirmation we personally ratify the vows and promises of our sponsors ; but the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is the consummation and completion of our christian hope, obedience, and charity. The eucharist is the most solemn ordinance of christianity. It most forcibly impresses on our minds the horrid consequences of sin, (to counteract whose effects the sacrifice of the beloved Son of God was required as an atonement) ; inspires us with the most ardent gratitude for the benefits purchased by his blood, renews our baptismal covenant with our heavenly Father, and ratifies our league of christian love with our brethren.

A resurrection might be inferred from the analogy between sleep and death, from the torpid state of flies and swallows in winter, and from the transformation of the loathsome caterpillar to a beautiful and delicate insect. But this natural knowledge was so obscured or diminished, that the most enlightened heathen philosopher viewed it through clouds and darkness, and distinguished it not sufficiently to be assured of its certainty.

Under

Under the Jewish dispensation, that tree of life, whose immortal taste would have produced eternity to man, without promoting his happiness, manifested his possibility of acquiring immortality. The translation of Enoch and Elijah proved the existence of a heavenly mansion for the reception of good men, and by a just inference for the admission of all. * Job, † Abraham, and ‡ Ezekiel exhibit undoubted testimony of their belief in a future state, and future recompence. Yet we behold the sceptical Sadducee rejecting this evidence, establishing his reason as the criterion of truth, and denying these doctrines, because his vain and unassisted mind was not capable of apprehending them. But “ *life and immortality are brought to light through the Gospel.*” “ *Now is Christ risen from the dead and become the first-fruits of them that slept.*” The Lord of the “ *resurrection and the life*” “ *will change our vile bodies, that they may be made like unto his glorious body, according to the mighty working whereby he is able to subdue all things unto himself.*” “ *That which is sown in corruption shall be raised in incorruption, that which is sown in dishonour shall be raised in glory, that which is sown in weakness shall be raised in power, that which is sown a natural body shall be raised a spiritual body.*” But a future resurrection is preparatory to a future judgment. We must all appear before the judgment-seat of Christ to give an account of the things done in the body, they that have done good unto ever-

* Job. xix. 25. † Gen. xxiii. Heb. xi. 10. ‡ Ezekiel xxxvii.

lasting salvation, and they that have done evil unto everlasting damnation.

To propagate and enforce these important truths, to shew the completion of the natural and Jewish law by the addition of the Gospel system, St. Paul dedicated this Epistle to the Hebrews. Prosecuting his design of perfecting the doctrines of christianity and morality, the Apostle of the Gentiles preached righteousness, temperance, and judgment, and appalled Felix on his tribunal. He declared to the Stoics and Epicureans of the Areopagus that unknown God whom they had ignorantly worshipped, and founded a church of the saints in the metropolis of the Roman Empire. Addressing himself to the understandings of mankind, he convinced the Athenians by arguments from the works of nature, and the ways of Providence ; and in the synagogues he disputed and “ *persuaded the things concerning the kingdom of God* ” from the Jewish scriptures. Like his master, preaching with authority and refuting the gainfayer, producing evidence incontestible, miracles performed, prophecies completed, the hopes of a future resurrection and reward, and the fears of a future punishment were published in less than two centuries from the Isles of the Archipelago to the Banks of the Ganges, and the Shores of the German Ocean.

God

God commanded all men every where to repent; the poor had the Gospel preached to them, and the cross of Christ, *to the Jews a stumbling-block, and to the Greeks foolishness*, was erected on the ruins of superstition and idolatry never to be overthrown. The lives of the primitive christians corresponded with their faith and professions, and heathens bear testimony to their humility, innocence, and benevolence. But “*the vine which the Lord had planted, which had taken root and filled the land; whose shadow covered the hills, whose boughs were like cedar-trees; whose branches stretched unto the sea, whose boughs unto the river; was nearly rooted up by the wild beasts of the field,*” and for a long series of years “*brought forth no fruit to perfection.*” The inundation of Barbarians, the convulsion of states, the heresies and distractions of the church overwhelmed for many ages all literature and civilization, all “*pure and undefiled religion.*” In this night of ignorance and superstition the doctrines and duties of christianity were long obscured. Learning was little cultivated, virtue little practised; piety consisted in monastic indolence, religion in ceremonious rituals. But though darkness enveloped mankind, the sacred records were still preserved to shine at a future period with undiminished lustre.

In the fifteenth century, the Book of Life was again exhibited to the world in the national language of each particular people;

people; and made the unerring standard of righteousness and godliness. The revival of letters and the invention of printing facilitated the communication of knowledge, and the principles of reformation. Religion, disembodied from scholastic divinity, was restored to its original simplicity, and the text of sacred scripture ascertained, by the collation of manuscripts and versions, beyond the precision of the most early æras. A church was built on the foundation of the Apostles and Martyrs, “*Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner-stone; the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever.*” This edifice, founded on a rock, is composed of the purest materials, ornamented with the most simple appendages, and fashioned after the model of the primitive and evangelical order. All may be admitted members of its communion, may partake of its benefits, and join in its liturgy, whose faith is grounded on the authority of Scripture*. Every sect of religion, by acknowledging it to approach nearer to scriptural establishment than any other church, save their own, vouches for its excellence. Holding fast, therefore, the profession of our calling, let us leave the rudiments, the elementary principles of christianity, “*the milk of the word,*” fit only for noviciates and children, to exercise our minds and judgment, that they may digest that perfect learning and knowledge, “*the strong meat*” of the proficient and manhood. “*Giving all dili-*

* Article VI.

gence, let us add to our faith virtue, and to virtue knowledge, and to knowledge temperance, and to temperance patience, and to patience godliness, and to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness charity."

As this age affects a superiority in divinity, in literature, and philosophy beyond any former period, and this pre-eminence, if existing, has undoubtedly been acquired by the continued revelations of the Most High, the gradual improvements, experiments, and labours of many successive generations; shall wise and prudent men reject those steps, and despise those directors by whose means they have attained the ascent? Shall men, participating the benefits of society, "*go back to nature for information* *" to regulate that society? Shall men, believing in the inspiration of the Apostles, follow that teacher †, who arrogantly boasts of reasoning more conclusively than St. Paul?—God forbid.

To

* Paine's Rights, Part II. p. 3, l. 5.

† Dr. Priestley says, "I think I have proved St. Paul an inconclusive reasoner."
—An acute and accurate reasoner, Mr. Locke, in his Notes on Romans, chap. viii. ver. 11, speaking of St. Paul, says, "I think there is not any where to be found a more pertinent close arguer, who has his eye always on the mark he drives at. This men would find if they would study him as they ought, with

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more

To conclude,—Rational apologies may be made for some immoralities of the nations antecedent to Christianity, and in the darker ages of ignorance and superstition. The pure sources of religion had been corrupted. The polluted stream had descended through many generations, and they flowed with the defiled current of their forefathers, ignorant of their course, and incapable of resisting the impetuous torrent. But who can vindicate a Christian's immorality in the present age? The doctrines and duties of Christianity, faith in God, a future resurrection, and eternal judgment; consequently the necessity of holiness, purity, and righteousness, are universally proclaimed. Youth are instructed from the earliest infancy in the principles of good and evil; informed that this life is a state of probation, where we must display our character as moral agents, that we may shine as the stars in the firmament of heaven: or have our portion in those dreadful regions, where "*the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.*" If our faith is more pure, our understandings more enlightened, more is required from us, and more regard to divine authority than to hypotheses of their own, or to opinions of the season. I do not say that he is every where clear in his expressions to us *now*: but I do say he is every where a coherent pertinent writer; and wherever, in his commentators and interpreters, any sense is given to his words, that disjoins, or deviates from his argument, and looks like a wandering thought, it is easy to know whose it is, and whose the impertinence, his, or theirs that father it on him."

our actions must correspond with our knowledge. Believing in a future recompence, when the spirits of just men made perfect will inherit uninterrupted joy, let us strive to attain those virtues and graces which will secure to us that inheritance incorruptible and undefiled that fadeth not away ; that we may be “ *caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air,*” when he shall “ *descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and the trump of God ;*” clothed with principalities and powers, the avenger of the injured, the justifier of the righteous, the Lord of heaven and earth.

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